

VZCZCXRO6136  
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV RUEHSR  
DE RUEHLB #1753/01 3500917  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 150917Z DEC 08  
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3781  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3263  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3473  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001753

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK  
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/14/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MASS](#) [MCAP](#) [LE](#) [IS](#) [IR](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: LAF COMMANDER TELLS CODEL ACKERMAN HE  
EXECUTES GOVERNMENT POLICY

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

-----

11. (C) In a December 13 meeting with Codel Ackerman, Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Jean Kahwagi stressed that the LAF's primary goal was to fight terrorists, and highlighted the U.S. assistance that the army needs in order to succeed. He underscored the importance of U.S. military assistance in the LAF's quest to defeat Fatah al-Islam and other terrorist groups based in the Palestinian refugee camps. Asked about Israel being considered Lebanon's enemy, he insisted it is the government's role, not his, to define who Lebanon's enemies are, and considered it his job to execute the orders of the government. He claimed he had seen no intelligence suggesting Hizballah was rearming, and asked for the U.S. and Israel to share any information they had on Hizballah weapons movement. He said UNIFIL was doing good work in helping the people of the south and guaranteeing security in southern Lebanon. End summary.

CONTINUED U.S. SUPPORT FOR THE LAF

-----

12. (C) Codel Ackerman, accompanied by Ambassador and Emboffs, met with LAF Commander General Jean Kahwagi December 13 at Yarze. Codel members were Rep. Gary Ackerman, D-NY, chairman of the HFAC subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, and subcommittee members Rep. Jeff Flake, R-AZ; Rep. Joe Wilson, R-SC; Rep. Brian Higgins, D-NY; and Rep. Ron Klein, R-FL; as well as subcommittee staffers David Adams, Greg McCarthy, and Howard Diamond. Congressman Ackerman began the meeting by stressing to General Kahwagi that his bipartisan delegation had come to pass the message that support for Lebanon will remain consistent in the new administration. He complimented Kahwagi on his army's good use of American equipment and training, and said the U.S. was committed to continuing its support to the LAF.

LAF PRIORITY IS FIGHTING TERRORISM

-----

13. (C) Kahwagi noted that although Israel is officially defined as Lebanon's primary enemy, Islamic terrorists are currently his top priority. He said the terrorists in the Palestinian camps are influenced by al-Qaeda, killing for the

sake of killing with an aim to re-establishing the Caliphate from 1600 years ago. He pointed out that these terrorists had killed sixteen of his men in a two-month period, and injured 100.

14. (C) Despite the grave danger the terrorists represent, Kahwagi said the LAF had made progress in defeating them. He deemed the LAF assault on Fatah al-Islam terrorists in the Nahr al-Barid camp in 2007 crucial in building credibility for the LAF and convincing Palestinian camp security committee officials to cooperate with the Lebanese, which had led to the detention of a large number of extremists. Based on these experiences, Kahwagi said he had determined what the LAF would require in order to eliminate the terrorists, and wanted to be clear that his requests for U.S. assistance, both training and equipment, were based on necessity. He said he recognized that the U.S. would not provide equipment that might threaten Israel if it fell into the hands of Hizballah, but claimed that in any event Hizballah's weapons are much better than anything the LAF has. (Note: The LAF has an excellent end-use monitoring record regarding U.S.-origin equipment. End Note.)

"ISRAEL IS THE ENEMY  
BECAUSE THE GOVERNMENT SAYS IT IS THE ENEMY"

15. (C) Noting that Israel had invaded Lebanon in 2006 not to target the LAF, but to target Hizballah, Rep. Ackerman asked Kahwagi what threat Israel posed that made it Lebanon's enemy. Kahwagi sidestepped the political argument, saying it

BEIRUT 00001753 002 OF 002

was not his responsibility to determine who Lebanon's enemies are. "I work for the government," he exclaimed. "The government says Israel is the enemy, not Hizballah. I am the hand of the government. I do what they ask me to do. If tomorrow they say Israel is not the enemy, fine." The General came back to this point several times over the course of the meeting, refusing to express an opinion on whether an Israeli withdrawal from Sheba'a Farms would delegitimize Hizballah's role as the "resistance" when asked. Nonetheless, he worried that the LAF would be "crushed" if confronted with an Israeli invasion.

NO PROOF OF HIZBALLAH'S REARMAMENT  
UNIFIL PRESENCE POSITIVE

16. (C) Rep. Wilson expressed concern about Hizballah's rearming since the 2006 war, particularly its procurement of rockets from Iran. Kahwagi explained Hizballah's deep integration into the Shia population of the south, and the difficulty in detecting Hizballah's movements as a result. He noted that he was the LAF brigade commander, stationed in the city of Nabatieh during the 2006 war, and could track none of Hizballah's operations. "The people are Hizballah," he said. "They keep their weapons with them. During the 2006 war, they defended their villages. But you can't see them. They are ordinary people." He stressed that neither the LAF nor UNIFIL had seen any evidence of Hizballah's rearming, and he suggested that the U.S. and Israel present whatever proof they might have that it is taking place.

17. (C) Kahwagi believed the presence of UNIFIL troops in the south was having a positive effect, and called LAF coordination with them excellent. He noted there had been no significant hostile actions across the Israeli border since the end of the war in 2006, and said UNIFIL was helping the local population and guaranteeing its security. When asked by Rep. Klein whether UNIFIL should be doing more to prevent Hizballah's smuggling of arms in its area of responsibility, Kahwagi said that this would require searches of private homes; it would be impossible in a democratic country for any force to enter people's homes searching for weaponry without specific cause. As for the LAF, Kahwagi returned to his

soldier's mantra: "As long as the government says they are a legitimate resistance, I cannot treat them as criminals. They will say I am an agent of Israel. The government gives the orders, and I execute."

"IRAN IS YOUR PROBLEM, NOT MINE"

-----

18. (C) The congressmen asked General Kahwagi his thoughts on Iranian influence in Lebanon. Kahwagi denied that Iran was influencing Lebanon as such, but acknowledged its importance.

"Whether you like them or not, they are big, near, and Shia. Half the Muslims in Lebanon are Shia." He remarked that both the Iranian government and private sector had helped rebuild the infrastructure bombed by the Israelis during the 2006 war, and said he did not currently see Iran as a threat.

When asked what approach the United States should take to the Iranian regime and how it would affect Lebanon, Kahwagi stated that the U.S. should talk to the Iranians. "You cannot ignore such an influential country. You know what you have to do. You are the ones with a problem with them. Your continued disagreement will affect us, but I can't solve this."

SISON